

Welcome fellow travelers to the mouth of

## **The Dawning Abyss**

A Primate Press Publication

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by

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### **Horrormeisters I**

#### **CLIVE BARKER**

Books of Blood III (Berkley) [1984]: Here are five of the stories with which young Mister Barker originally grasped the horror genre by the throat, including "Son of Celluloid" (wherein an intelligent cancer haunts an old movie house and impersonates old screen stars) and the infamous "Rawhead Rex" (a proto-typically Barkereque—which is to say, bizarrely eroticized—treatment of the monster-on-the-loose-in-a-country-village theme (with the infamous scene of the monster pissing on the priest), which was later made into an extremely minor motion picture...). Good for Barker fans—and other people with a similar yen for such hi-jinks.

Imajica (Harper) [1991]: This is Barker's most recent Big Novel, and, as with Weaveworld and The Great and Secret Show, the philosophical underpinnings and the plot are both extremely complex (beginning with the premise that the Earth we know is but one of five Dominions, and involving various interdimensional theological conspiracies), and there are a wealth of strange and well-developed characters (primarily featuring John Furie Zacharias, a master art forger and amnesiac sorcerer, and Pie 'oh' Pah, an ambisexual assassin of love and death—but including also probably over a hundred others that also seem to breathe with improbable vividness). The running themes include betrayal, reconciliation and overthrowing the cosmic patriarchy. I found this all utterly fascinating, but judged as a novel, Imajica does not seem to me to be as well-formed as the two earlier ones mentioned above (though I'm sure it is was as carefully and deliberately formed into its final shape as were they). It is hugely unwieldy at around 650 pages, and much of this bulk is taken up with vast panoramic tours of the various other Dominions—interesting enough, and not without

purpose, but deadly to plot movement. Still, it is a novel no one else could even have conceived of, let alone actually have pulled off with any significant degree of success, and, since it is by Barker, something utterly unexpected and brilliant does happen every few pages. So it does get a very strong recommendation, if not an entirely unqualified one.

Clive Barker's Shadows in Eden, edited by Stephen Jones (Underwood-Miller) [1991]: This is really for the Barker fanatic, at \$39.95 for this clothbound speciality volume. Virtually every page is illustrated by a Barker sketch. There are innumerable articles by and about Barker, covering seemingly every aspect of his work in film and theatre as well as his writing, his influences from Dr. Faustus to Swamp Thing, interviews both with him and conducted by him, etcetera. There are sidebar snippets on almost every page from other sources as well (lectures, private letters, newspaper stories). Contributors include Ramsay Campbell, Neil Gaiman, Joe Bob Briggs, Tim Burton, Stephen King (of course) and dozens of others. There is also a complete Bibliography (covering up to The Great and Secret Show, I think), and an Afterward where Clive claims that it's all a mistake and that all this stuff was really written-drawn-directed-composed-etcetera by some other guy with the same name. In such an attempt to be exhaustive, there is inevitably much repetition, but there are unusual surprises here and there too. (For example, despite all the more common taboos which he shrugs off without a thought, there is one topic which he deliberately chooses to not use as fodder for his horror tales—seemingly for moral reasons—and it is one which other writers use freely: the Holocaust.) This is an interesting effort, meant to be dipped into rather than read straight through—but if you aren't completely kazongas about Barker already, you probably won't miss not owning this.

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*Dreamscapes I*

[The first couple of dreams below have appeared in recent issues or TOUCH and Golden APA, but I'm including them here anyway since I may be distributing this zine to some people outside those apas as well. Beginning with the March 3rd entry in Dreamscape section II, however, the entries are from my most recent cycle of being able to remember my excursions into The Dreaming.]

*9/11/92 (Fri):* I'd turned off the light and the tv, and had fallen asleep in my chair before I'd managed to get up and stumble over to the bed. It was around midnight, and I only dozed off for a few minutes, but I woke up still dreaming. For a few seconds I saw the darkened room illuminated by dozens of large butterflies with wings which glowed, each one in a different neon-bright color. Some were in the air, but most were on various surfaces, pulsing their wings up and down like slow heartbeats. (This is possibly the closest I've ever come to a classic psychedelic-type hallucination. Even when I used to do acid and mushrooms and such, I never got much in the way of strong visuals.)

*9/14/92 (Mon):* I had a very complicated dream with a multiple framing device. In the dream "I" start out with my feet up watching a television (neither the room nor the television were my own familiar ones—come to think of it, neither were the feet, which wore big engineer boots). On the tv was one of those two-headed movie review programs. This one had Gene Siskel and Gore Vidal and they both loved this particular movie. The body of the dream consisted of the "clip" they had from it. The set-up established that the movie was filmed on location in the Swiss Alps and had stupendous aerial mountain scenery and featured three main characters, all of whom were played by gorgeous intense young unknown-in-America actors. In it this fabulously wealthy brother and sister hire a young American art scholar/architect/engineer (female) both to catalog their extensive centuries-old family art collection, and to plan and execute the delicate task of moving it from storage in a remote ancestral mountain-top castle to the more modern palatial chalet which they have decided to make their main residence. This involves moving priceless paintings and sculpture hundreds of miles directly over some of the most dangerous high mountain terrain in Europe. It is decided that the best way to accomplish this is by balloon, so a regular balloon transport shuttle is

set up taking advantage of prevailing seasonal winds (this project not incidentally become a major media event). In the middle of all this, the American gets drawn into a complicated emotional triangle with the brother and sister.

The specific clip they had on this show involved a lengthy multi-layer conversation—sexual innuendo, art history, shared secrets, mysterious intimations, alchemical symbolism, frivolous wit, sincere bonding—between the American (short, with brown curly hair, a buxom figure, and a round face with incandescent blue eyes) and the sister (tall, with straight blonde hair, a lean athletic figure, high cheek-bones and cool gray eyes). Once the clip began I was experiencing it as if it were happening, from a camera viewpoint. The conversation begins when they are walking together to the balloon launch site to inspect the arrangements, having just come up the mountain by cable-car lift, and continues as they enter the undercarriage of a transport balloon and cast off, sailing high above the peaks to the landing site. They are so rapt in conversation—and fascinated with one another—that they never even look away from each other's faces while sailing through the sky, though the camera angle—and the whole thing seems to be shot in one take—swoops around the balloon in flight and gives the viewer a full appreciation of the gorgeous setting. The undercarriage of the balloon consists only of a loose rope web to which they have to cling in a standing position, facing each other; the ground speeds by beneath their feet—some peaks no more than a few feet below them—as they fly along. The whole thing was quite amazing.

After this "clip"—which sure made *me* wish I could see the rest of the movie!—Siskel went into a rapturous hymn of praise for the film, exalting it to the heavens in every possible aspect, in ornately verbose language, pretty much making a fatuous ass of himself in the process. Following this burbling paeon, Gore Vidal—who obviously was too cool to either repeat what had already been said or to just say "ditto"—grinned broadly and pressed a button under his desk, which caused multi-colored pennants to spring out of his desktop and celebratory fireworks in the background on a huge projection screen, as well as setting off live rockets and a harmless bomb-burst to explode live on the set. (He may also have held up a small hand-lettered card which simply said "go see it"—or this may have been so strongly implied that it just seemed that way.)

Bitchin' dream.

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## Horrormeisters II

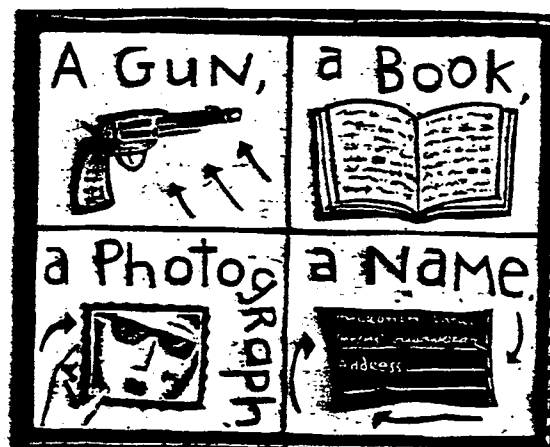
POPPY Z. BRITE

**Lost Souls** (Dell/Abyss) [1992]: This is a first novel by the little lady with the improbable name whose shorter pieces have been appearing for a while now in various horror anthologies and the Borderlands books. It's certainly an impressive debut and has gotten big time treatment from the publisher, even including a big juicy ad in the *Times* Sunday Book Review section, with blurbs screaming her praises by Harlan Ellison and Dan Simmons. Although those stalwart souls studiously avoid doing so, it is inevitable, on the basis of this book, that Ms. Brite will be taken to be the second coming of Anne Rice. Why? This is a vampire novel by a woman which eroticizes vampirism in ways which have never quite been done before; and, it is set largely in a well-evoked New Orleans (where the author grew up). (Maybe Anne, Poppy and Nancy Collins should form themselves a club.) The writing is very good, very vivid. And more than a little disturbing on more than one level (as it should be). But Brite is no Rice clone, there are differences as well as similarities. Significantly, the way she chooses to portray vampirism—though she also seems to be rather more sympathetic to her creations than they seem to deserve—differs greatly. Yes, virtually all of her vampires are brutally beautiful gay males. And, oddly, the condition of vampirism—which is seen as an, almost fragile, separate race living secretly (in the closet?) alongside humankind—is apparently inherently misogynistic: full-blooded vampire infants eat their way out of their mother's womb (almost inevitably leading to her demise). Older vampires can consume only blood (and, it seems, sperm...), but the younger new-fangled vamps are sturdier, and seem to also consume vast quantities of sugar, junk food and booze. (In fact, they pretty much seem to live and act and dress like vicious amoral punk rockers eternally on the road without ever having to deal with the inconvenience of having to show up for a gig.) Bloodtaking is often paralleled or associated with various other things—such as massive use of illegal drugs, constant drunkenness, obsessive relationships, and compulsive cruelty (as well as with homosexuality). And—very unlike Rice—Brite's vampires (with a few exceptions) are low-class, low-minded, petty, vicious white trash louts. (Though we are given characters who aren't utter and complete sleazeballs to provide somewhat more

sympathetic viewpoints, they invariably fall in love with some sleazeball or another at first sight, inevitably to their eventual—or immediate—utter degradation.) There's little point in detailing the plot or describing specific characters here. If the writing weren't so good, I would have gladly dismissed this book because it's so creepily nihilistic, disturbing and otherwise generally unnerving. Instead, I must grudgingly admit that it is an interesting and provocative read.

RAMSEY CAMPBELL

**Incarnate** (Tor) [1983]: I ought to read more Ramsey Campbell. This book and *Ancient Images* are the only novels by him I've read, and that is clearly an oversight. (Quite aside from the fact that just about every successful writer in the field cites him reverentially as a significant major influence.) This novel charts the unexpected aftermath of an experiment in collective dreaming. It's full of deftly drawn believable and varied characters, a range of normal folks mostly, with the normal problems of people struggling to live their lives as best they can in a vividly evoked contemporary (early Thatcherite 80s) London. (Brutal cops, sexual harassment, a crushing economy, sleazy reporters, the congenital imbecility of one's fellow human beings—you know, life in the big city.) There would probably be a nice little novel here even if the initiating plot event never happened, and reality itself were not progressively getting warped out of shape in numerous significant and troubling ways. (In fact, in some ways, those were my least favorite parts.) Yes, I really must read more Ramsey Campbell.



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*Dreamscapes II*

*3/13/93 (Sat):* "I" wasn't in the dream I woke up remembering this morning. Instead, the protagonist seemed to be—or at least looked like—the young dark-haired actress who plays the new associate on this year's season of *LA Law*. The setting, however, seemed to be the Chicago of *Reasonable Doubts*, and the general tone seemed to be more like that show as well. The specific setting for the scene, however, was the back room of a tailor shop in the middle of the afternoon. There was an expensively-dressed organized-crime-kingpin-who-likes-to-pose-as-a-legitimate-businessman type who was getting a fitting, and a half-eaten pizza in a box on a desk. In walks this young woman, somewhat breathless and slightly disheveled, as though she has been rushing around all day. She has been led to this back room by a tall handsome young man who enters, smiling, right behind her. He is also extremely well-dressed and seems to be some kind of flunky-companion of the older man. She is here because she wants to ask the older guy some questions, and has finally managed to track him down; apparently she is an assistant DA or something like that. They are both extremely polite and cordial to one another, and seem to know each other well. (There is no actual dialog in the dream, although they are speaking to each other. It is though I am watching the scene on a screen with the sound turned down or the dialog in another language, but have previously read the story the scene is based on so I know the gist without actually hearing the specific words; tone and attitude are clear from body language.) She determinedly asks him some questions, he smoothly turns her questions aside. He offers her some pizza, which she declines, though she is obviously hungry and probably missed lunch. (Her face is very animated and shows a lot of different emotions clearly.) Then, as she tries to get her derailed questioning back on track, the younger man—who she obviously finds quite attractive, though, as with the pizza, she tries to ignore this distraction—walks across the small room, picks up a violin and begins casually playing something classical like a virtuoso, still smiling. She is finally completely derailed from her train of thought and utterly delighted at this surprising development. She also—belatedly—recognizes him as someone who was a well-known soloist with the local symphony orchestra until a couple years ago when he quit and disappeared from sight. The older man nods indulgently and admits that the guy came to work for him because he "owes me a few favors". Finally

giving up on getting anywhere in her investigation, more interested now in why this guy gave up his professional career to be this other guy's flunky and pet musician (and why he seems so contented about it), she excuses herself—though not before warmly thanking the musician for the impromptu concert—and exits. The older guy watches her go and his eyes grow cold. Still watching the curtained doorway, he speaks to a young woman who has been kneeling near the floor fussing with his cuffs and a tape measure—or otherwise being deliberately inobtrusive—the whole time, asking her if she "got enough". She stands and brushes her hair back from her face, revealing herself to be very similar physically to the woman who has just left. She nods and imitates something the other woman said perfectly, along with a characteristic hand gesture and body posture. Apparently the whole scene was a deliberate set-up to give this actress a chance to observe the assistant DA up-close and off-guard, so that she could be used in some plan to discredit her.

When I woke up, I had a distinct and unusual craving for buttered toast dunked in hot coffee.

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*Only in New York I*

*9/18/92 (Fri):* It must've been my day for seeing elderly celebrities on the street in mufti. After almost running straight into Jack Palance in the lunchtime rush on Fifth Avenue, I nearly bumped into Mel Torme around 5pm up around 58th and Madison. Jack was by himself and was dressed in a kind of cheap-looking plain brown suit. He is a really tall guy, even though his spine seemed kind of hunched over in a way I'm sure his pride would never have allowed if there'd been a camera nearby. (He saw me do a double-take and recognize him when we nearly collided, and he pointedly—almost shyly—looked away from me; I could almost hear him praying to God that I wouldn't try to way-lay him or draw attention to him in the middle of all those people. (I didn't.)) Mel was wearing a baseball cap and a brand-new canvas vest with lots of pockets and looked like somebody's grandfather dressed to go fishing. (And, in fact, he seemed to have a rather wane and anemic-looking blonde young man in his upper teens with him, unwillingly dogging his heels; neither of them seemed particularly thrilled with the arrangement.)

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### Horrormeisters III

GRAHAM MASTERSON

On the other hand, I'm not sure why I keep reading Graham Masterson, since he is often a disappointing read one way or another. Maybe it's because he occasionally shows flashes of surprising ability, and can sometimes evoke sharply memorable images in the middle of an otherwise banal and annoying plot. Maybe because it's easy to find his books second-hand for a buck. One of those. Or maybe he's better than I remember right now. Let's see.

All of the following were pubbed by Tor, except for The Sphinx, which was pubbed by Pinnacle.

The Manitou [1975]: This early novel is pretty much the prototype for almost all of Masterson's subsequent work: an ancient magical evil which has been trapped or hidden rises up in the modern world, and the plot action quickly becomes a race between these evil forces and the good guys, who must figure a way to get the genie back in the bottle before it has a chance to consolidate itself and become overwhelming and unstoppable and breaks totally free to wreak untold havoc. (Ancient evils love to wreak untold havoc; it's sort of their dream job.) In this case the looming evil is the titular 17th century Native American sorcerer Misquamacus (who owes his origin and nature more to Lovecraft than anything in mainstream history), who has an abiding hatred for the white race, and who is magically growing himself a new body via a tumor attached to the neck of an innocent young girl. Arrayed against him are the unlikely trio of her doctor, a Native American shamanistic healer called Singing Rock, and a professional fake psychic named Harry Erskine. By and large, this all works very well. The action proceeds and continually accelerates, the characters are well-drawn and distinct, and everything is leanly pared down to basics. (A movie was made from this several years ago which I saw for the first time only recently, and it follows the book surprisingly closely.)

Sphinx [1978]: On the other hand, the movie they made from this novel had virtually nothing whatsoever to do with the book. Just about the only things they do have in common are the titles and the fact that both are gawdawful. Here a rather thick-headed young up-and-coming state department fellow meets a gorgeously exotic Egyptian-American girl with a deep, dark family secret. (Hint: People keep

getting mauled as if by some sort of great cat.) Hilarity ensues. Pfui.

Night Warriors [1987], Death Dream [1988], and Night Plague [1991]: These novels are each self-contained (I read them in reverse order myself), but are all stories of various ordinary people who are modern-day incarnations of an ancient group of dream-walking knights who are called upon to fight evil in other people's nightmares, evil which takes the form of dream-demons who were banished from our world by the original dream-warriors, and which threaten to re-emerge in the present day. Basically, when these people dream-walk, they become super-heroes, each with their own uniquely specific powers and abilities in the realm of dreams. The Night Warriors are recruited and trained by a mysteriously polymorphous being named Springer, a rather odd kind of "angel", or messenger, sent by the One True God, whose name—it seems—is Ashapola. This series is a departure for Masterson in large part, because he is here making use of a mythology which he himself has constructed. Each of these books is, I think, a little better than the previous one, and shows Masterson being willing to take risks—not always successful risks—which he seems to tend to avoid in his more formulaic works.

The first book is set in California, where women are being seduced and raped and killed by the men of their dreams; their dead bodies become vehicles for the gesttion of a new generation of larval nightspawn. This volume introduces a team of Night Warriors led by a elderly philosophy professor. In the second volume, a 9-year-old kid in Philadelphia has become the unwitting host of a murderous demon which emerges when he sleeps. Several Warriors from the previous book recur, and several more are introduced, with the emphasis being on the newer characters. And the third volume is perhaps the most bizarre. It is set in England, where a famous American concert pianist—a man—is brutally raped by a supernatural being wearing the guise of a street-person, and becomes infected with a sexually transmitted spiritual disease—not without acute physical effects—which is so catching that you can infect someone else just by having an erotic dream about them! Springer—in his/her/its most flamboyant appearance yet—soon shows up to recruit the pianist and several others together for a new team to defeat the originator of this plague.

These books are by no means great literature, and from chapter to chapter they are often wildly uneven, but they reach out and grab you more than his other books—they stir sincere emotions—and they have sufficient depth to be read on a variety

of levels. And they are an unusual and generally successful mixture of the horror novel with the superhero genre.

**Walkers [1989]:** In this story, which is set in Wisconsin, the protagonist—a not particularly likable or intelligent small businessman named Jack Reed—comes across a long-abandoned sanitarium called The Oaks, which looks to him like a perfect property to redevelop into a posh country club. (Anybody who thinks he's right, please raise your hand...) The place has—of course—an unusual history. It seems all the inmates up and disappeared without a trace some several decades ago. Soon Jack's son is kidnapped and held hostage by the madmen whose spirits live on, trapped in the very walls of the asylum. The madmen are this book's version of a powerful ancient evil, of course, trapped by an even more ancient Druid spell gone awry; their leader, Quintus Miller, demands of Reed that he find a way to release them back into the world, or his son is forfeit. (The theme of a father who must overcome his own fears, as well as other seemingly insurmountable limitations of his own personality and circumstances, in order to save the life of his son, is a recurring one in later works by Masterson.) Much of this is imaginatively told, but the ending is unsatisfying, and there is no escaping the major encumbrance of a main protagonist who evokes distaste and contempt, even when he is presumably supposed to be seen as heroic and self-sacrificing.

**Master of Lies [1992]:** There is a new and particularly imaginative ritualistic mass-murderer—who mutilates and kills whole families—making the rounds and racking up a body count in the dozens in San Francisco; the papers have nick-named him the Fog City Satan. Stalwart honest cop and nice-guy family man Larry Foggia is put on the case because the usual methods have gotten nowhere and Larry's own unique intuitive style—no lead or source is too absurd or irrational—has gotten results in the past. It soon becomes apparent to Larry that these murders are intended as sacrifices, performed to—*all together now!—bring back an ancient evil.* (Wotta soo-prize, huh?) Soon, even second-rate psychics begin spouting warnings and spewing ectoplasm whenever Larry gets anywhere near them, and Larry gets wind of an occult group called—with charmingly direct simplicity—the Black Brotherhood. He eventually hooks up with a cooperative professional sham/psychic (who is something of a high-class version of Erskine, from *The Manitou*), and also with a lady reporter (who has conveniently

pre-digested a lot of necessary historical research); soon, things start popping left and right. Though this is structurally considerably more complicated, the narrative here moves and builds as rapidly and surely as in none of his other books which I've read, save *The Manitou*. The numerous characters are vivid and full. He didn't flub the ending either—which would have been very easy to do—and all in all, I must admit I liked this one considerably. (Okay, so I remembered that I like Masterson a little more than I thought. So sue me.)

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### *Dreamscapes III*

**3/14/93 (Sun):** I am in an apartment I don't recognize where I evidently live. It is late; the lights are low, and I [in the dream] am cuddling on a large comfortable couch with a woman whom I [observing] don't recognize; she has evidently been my lover for some time. We are about to adjourn to go to bed, when I hear a strange sound coming from the direction of the kitchen. As I move through the apartment, I see that it is almost bare—of furniture, decoration, possessions—although I have been living there for some time. I get to the kitchen and check first under the sink, and find it full of dripping water, though apparently not from the pipes. I get up and turn on the light, and find that the whole wall behind the sink is soaked with water and, further, that water is beginning to pour out of it like a waterfall.

**3/16/93 (Tues):** This time it was something about some futuristic scientific base where they had successfully miniaturized a bunch of people down to microscopic size for some purpose, but had been unable to bring them back to normal. There was some technological means of interfacing with them for sound and visual communication, which manifested as an oval portal-like affair in the air in front of the person doing the communicating (which always made it a personal 2-way communication, rather than something generally broadcast). All of the people who had been shrunk were dying, slowly and horribly. They all looked like famine victims or people in the final stages of dying from cancer or AIDS or something. There was nothing anyone on the "outside" could do for them but talk to them, and few people on the project had the stomach to even do that as their condition became so severely deteriorated. (Some people at the project were actually in favor of simply severing communications with them and having done with it, but the project head wouldn't

hear of this.) I think the leader of the shrunken people and the leader of the project were both women. There was a lot of grief and guilt and recrimination and denial of responsibility among the people on the outside, but the small people were too far gone for anything like that; they were exhausted and resigned and just wanted to keep some contact with the outside until they died.

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### *Only in New York II*

**3/5/93 (Fri):** As you may have heard—it was in all the papers—on the last Friday in February somebody with a lot of explosive and too much time on their hands blew a humongus hole in the parking garage of the Twin Towers in lower Manhattan. This isn't about that—exactly—but on the other hand it is. Sort of.

The first work-day after the bombing—I guess it would have been Monday the 1st of March—around 4 pm, the rain was drizzling lightly when I came out of the subway for a delivery at the ~~NY Times~~ *NY Times* to find something unusual—even for Times Square—happening at Times Square. There was a huge humanoid balloon standing astride the center of the Square—smack in the middle, towering over that military recruiting cubicle on the triangle of concrete where Broadway intersects 7th Avenue. (I mean, we're talking the size of Underdog in the Thanksgiving Day Parade, only earthbound—at least 7 or 8 stories or maybe more.) A considerable crowd had gathered, but nobody seemed to be filming a movie or anything (well, except for several delirious tourists) and no one present, even the mounted policeman I queried, seemed to have any idea who was responsible or what the purpose of this artifact was.

For a balloon, it was remarkably crafted and detailed. It portrayed a man, in snakeskin cowboy boots, blue jeans, and a loose brown leather jacket. He was white, blonde, and his features were regular, not recognizably anyone in particular. (At least, not from where I was standing—pictures taken from about ten blocks up Broadway which I saw later clearly showed who it was supposed to be.) His arms were slightly bent, each hand held above waist high out from his body, and he also held something in each hand. That was the really remarkable part. In the right hand, he was clutching what seemed to be a huge flacid black phallus. My best guess was either that this was supposed to be a black-jack, or that that cel hadn't fully inflated. And in his left hand was a bomb! Three or four red sticks of what was obviously intended to be dynamite, taped together

and trailing a huge single fuse. The consensus of the crowd, near as I could ascertain, was that this was supposed to be some sort of large-scale performance-art "statement" about the bombing. About this I had my doubts, but I finally just gave it a mental you-see-some-strange-things-in-this-city shrug (the one I used *both* times I came upon a pair of transvestites having their photographic portrait taken with a llama on 57th Street at 3 in the morning), and proceeded philosophically to my next pick-up.

The next day, as I was dressing to go to work, the fine folks at Channel 5 passed on the information—while I was waiting for the weather report—that for the next 10 days Arnold Schwarzenegger's new film, The Last Action Hero would be filming in and around Times Square (they announced this to tell people that since certain streets would be blocked off at various times, nobody should go there if they didn't have to—yeah, right). Aha, I thought, mystery solved. But—that day when I passed through the Square, there was no balloon. No sign, in fact, that there had ever been a balloon. Okay. It makes sense that perhaps Arnie hisownself—or his production company PR department anyway—would have second thoughts about a giant Arnie with a bomb astride Times Square just days after the Trade Center bombing, right?

But that's not the end of it. The very *next* day, the balloon was back in place, but different. For one thing, the item in his right hand was no longer flacid, it was fully erect and jutting forth at a jaunty angle, revealing itself to be a Brobdignagian sawn-off shot-gun (yet—no less a phallus). And the item in his left hand had undergone an even more miraculous metamorphosis. Instead of the bunch of sticks of dynamite, poised as if ready to be thrown, now, in the giant Arnie's hand, there was a huge square black wallet, flipped over to reveal a big bright and shiny Federal Marshal's badge!

Now that's what I call spin control!

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## Horrormeisters IV

ROBERT R. McCAMMON

I liked McCammon's World War II werewolf spy story (The Wolf's Hour [1989]) and went mildly nuts over his magical realism-ish hymn to growing up in a small town in Alabama *cum* murder mystery (Boy's Life [1991]), so I started scouting the used book bins for other books by him and found a bunch, some very rewarding, others not so (as one might expect). McCammon often seems to take a central premise and freight it up, work it for all it's worth. And he doesn't seem like repeating himself; all his books that I've seen are very different in theme and substance. He seems to make a conscious effort to stretch himself from book to book.

All of books below are from Pocket except for Usher's Passing, which was pubbed by Ballantine.

Bethany's Sin [1980]: Between the woman riding the horse under a full moon on the cover and the title, I'll bet a lot of romance novel readers picked this one up and got a rude surprise when they discovered that that's not what it is at all. In fact, this is an entry in the horror sub-genre wherein a nice but somewhat troubled nuclear family moves to a nice, picture-perfect little town to make a new start—only to find that beneath the surface of the tidy village (*ta-tum*) something is Not Quite Right. Here, Daddy is a not-very-successful writer who has been troubled by what amount to prophetic nightmares since he was tortured as a POW in Vietnam; Mommy is a math teacher who is too determinately rationalistic for her own good (and 5-year-old Laurie is never given much of a personality). Frankly, if the Afterward didn't allege a different genesis for this tale, I would have placed heavy money on it having been written during a particularly nasty divorce. It seems that men aren't doing very well in the town of Bethany's Sin. The vengeful spirits of a bunch of psycho-killer Fury-like Amazonian warriors are taking over the women of the town—and they take considerable delight in killing or mutilating (and also occasionally drugging and raping) the men in their local zip code. (They literally carry battle-axes. Honest.) And their leader is a classic cliché ball-busting man-hater who is simultaneously gorgeous, super-rich, super-intelligent, politically powerful *and* has the power to control the minds of other women with the most casual glance of her powerful hypnotic gaze. This plot is basically a misogynistic gynophobe's worst paranoid nightmare

come true. The writing is straightforward and competent, but unfortunately the novel really isn't very good, the ending is an unlikely convulsion of violence (as the Army combat vet protagonist unbelievably takes on the whole town single-handedly), the villainess is a caricature, and the premise isn't strong enough to sustain interest without more development than it gets here.

The Night Boat [1980]: How many undead Nazi zombie stories have there been? A lot, right? This is another one, and it's better than you'd expect on that premise alone. The action takes place on the tiny, relatively undeveloped Caribbean island of Coquina, and the saving stroke here is the vivid portrayal of the island itself, and of the motley group of people on it. There are some awkwardly handled plot developments here and there, but by and large this one is put together pretty well. This time the climax is orchestrated more deftly, and involves several characters working together to bring about a conclusion which is in many ways structurally similar to that of Bethany's Sin, but more satisfying.

Usher's Passing [1984]: The premise here is that E.A. Poe based his Ushers on a genuine extremely wealthy family (who didn't much care for his story, lemme tell ya). That house never actually fell though (though nobody lives in it any more), and the family itself continues to this day, complete with their genetic family "curse" of sporadic sensory hyper-sensitivity, which they all share to one degree or another. The main protagonist here is Rix, a horror novelist in a skump, who is called home to the family estate on the occasion of the impending death of his father, from the terminal effects of acute Usher's Malady. This is a classic set-up for Gothic horror, and McCammon makes the most of it, but he also successfully grafts on numerous other plotlines, involving psychic hill-folk who live in the forest surrounding the Usher estate, and a murderous local boogy-man called the Pumpkin Man, who seems to be walking in the night hunting children. And there's some kind of secret project which the patriarch has been pouring money into of late, which somehow involves midnight visits from high-ranking Pentagon officials... These and dozens of other elements are brought together in an intricate and deftly woven web of genuinely macabre strangeness, as Rix pieces together the horrible truth of just what it means to be an Usher. McCammon is flexing his muscles here, beginning to set himself more complex challenges as a writer, and finding himself up to the task.



Swan Song [1987]: It is inevitable that this book be compared to Stephen King's The Stand—which I have little doubt helped to inspire it—as it is an epic battle between Good and Evil fought across a battered American landscape in the years after a man-made holocaust has destroyed civilization as we know it, and most of the people as well. There is a lot of horror here, certainly—both natural and supernatural. Cruel and bitter things happen, and McCammon's horror-writer sensibilities are certainly evident. But, more importantly, there is also the emergence of a deeper, richer, more profound magical sensibility—call it a sense of the miraculous—which later emerges as the dominant voice in Boy's Life (where the horror element actually takes a back seat). This is a big, roomy novel, and McCammon is smoothly in control throughout. And some of his best, most memorable, characters are here too: Sister Creep—a New York City bag lady before the hammer falls, who becomes the custodian of Something Wonderful; Josh (aka Black Frankenstein)—a classic gentle giant who goes from circuit wrestler to paladin; Roland—a vicious psychotic child who is also a knight—of sorts; Rusty Weathers—perhaps the last clown on Earth; Robin Oakes—young leader of a tribe of lost boys; Leona, the Good Witch; Colonel Macklin, the one-handed puppet fascist; and the Man with the Scarlet Eye—an incarnation of Evil who is curiously banal next to the humans who align with him. Plus crowds of others, none of which are throwaway. And, especially, there is Swan Prescott—a young woman with the power of life in her hands, and an even greater power as well: the ability to plant a seed of hope in the hearts of those around her. Like her, this novel is a beauty. Excellent.

Stinger [1987]: This time the action is confined to a tiny dying town on the edge of a desert in Texas. Again, the basic plot McCammon begins with will be somewhat familiar: a disincorporate super-intelligent escapee from an alien prison camp crash-lands on the edge of town, and promptly seeks refuge inside the body of a little girl; not long thereafter, a vastly more physically powerful alien bounty hunter lands and commits considerable mayhem seeking out its quarry. McCammon tightens things up by having Stinger—the bounty hunter—immediately throw up an impenetrable force screen around the town, throwing all the human characters on their own unaided resources. Stinger the novel is kind of a refined distillation of all those 50s and 60s alien invasion movies on that level. Stinger—the character—is profoundly polymorphously nasty, sending out extensions of itself which are *doppelgangers* for local citizens (except for having more than a bit of Freddy Krueger about them), and Daufin (the little-girl alien) manages to be both cute and genuinely inhuman. But if that's all there were, you might as well put Yoda and the Predator in a ring and have them duke it out. We also have a wide variety of interesting human characters—but the really odd thing is that there seems to be a little bit of West Side Story in the mix too—with rival teen-age gangs—one Hispanic, the other white—ready to rumble at the drop of racial slur. (And each gang, with perhaps a bit too much symmetry, is led by a macho young stud who is secretly in his heart of hearts a Sensitive Guy, but social pressure and a dysfunctional family life keeps each of them from admitting it. And one of them has this sister...) The characters here aren't quite as strong and memorable as in Swan, but they're pretty good; and, as he showed in The Night Boat with the island of Coquina (and also with some of the isolated locales evoking small communities which are cut off from the rest of civilization (if any), forcing individuals who otherwise might ignore or spit at each other on the street to either work together to fight a common enemy, or perish together with their prejudices intact. There's a lot of good stuff here, and—especially for a slam-bang alien invasion all-out action fest—this is pretty thoughtful, and works on several levels.

Blue World [1990]: This is a collection of about a dozen short stories—written over about ten years—and one short novel—apparently not previously published. In recent years I haven't been much of a fan of short fiction—especially modern short horror fiction, which often seems to be the literary equivalent of a short, nasty and unpleasant joke. (Most short horrific fiction leaves me thinking along the lines of either "Yeah, so?" or "Why did I bother reading that when I could have been doing something useful like clipping my cats' claws?") It generally requires something of more complexity than a dozen or two pages for the genre to arouse my interest. So, adjusting for my own admitted prejudices, this mixed-bag collection doesn't come off too badly, with only about half the stories producing that degree of lack of (or negative) interest. My favorites from this collection are "Night Calls for the Green Falcon"—about an aged serial hero who comes out of retirement to track down a modern serial killer—and the titular "Blue World"—which centers around porno star with a double life who becomes the object of obsession for both a troubled young priest and a murderous stalker. Neither rely on supernatural or science-

fictional premises, and both seem concerned with the theme of redemption. (And also—I see in checking back now as I write this—they are also both the two longest and most recent entries this volume.)

#### *Dreamscapes IV*

Nine [1990]: Here, McCammon shuns the supernatural as plot device, and finds the source of this novel's horror in the twisted mind of the his villain, Mary Terrell, aka Mary Terror. Mary has been underground and on her own for a couple of decades, since the FBI shut down the radically violent splinter group of the Weathermen to which she belonged—called the Storm Front—in a shoot-out in New Jersey in 1972. Mary is very smart and very tough and very cagey, and she is completely and utterly mondo bugfuck berserk crazy as well. She is certainly as monstrous as any of McCammon's more supernatural creations, and is in her own way even more scary. Mary is not only insane, ultraviolent, and still obsessed with "offing the Pig Mindfuck State" (and everyone she sees as traitors to this cause)—she is additionally obsessed with having a baby all her own (she miscarried during that showdown in New Jersey). So she steals a newborn from a hospital. The mother of the child she steals is the other major character here. She is Laura Clayborne: a journalist yuppie suburbanite with a failing marriage, who drives a BMW and has always let either her parents or her husband protect her. When it slowly dawns on her that the authorities are no more likely to be able to catch Mary Terror than they ever were, and that they aren't all that likely to care all that much about the welfare of her child if they do, she finds some steel in her own character that she had no idea was there, and takes out on the road by herself after Mary. There's a murderously revenge-bent ex-FBI agent on Mary's scent too, who hates her for permanently mutilating him when she made her escape back in New Jersey. The trail leads both Mary and Laura down various long and dangerous highways, to meetings with other ex-Storm Fronters and numerous random strangers, and eventually to their inevitable one-on-one confrontation. This is all well-handled, and while I do have some quibbles with McCammon's use (and possible misuse) of 60s symbols and symbolism and such in this book (Mary's personal symbol is a yellow smiley-face? Huh?), I'm willing to overlook it. Laura's forced personal evolution is well-handled, and McCammon doesn't make the mistake of making *all* the other ex-Storm Fronters burn-outs or sell-outs or morons. This book is somewhere between his fair, straightforward early novels and his excellent, complex later novels.

3/21/93 (Sun): In a dream within a dream, there was some muddled but extended bit about transcendence and incarnation and shattered bits of godhead returning to materiality, hidden somehow in unlikely places between the cracks of reality, bearing some personal message for certain individuals. There were UFOs and cow pastures and scientists and lots of rushing around and Deep Mystery.

Then in the dream I woke up as a teen-age boy who had been having the above dream. His bedroom showed him to be of a fairly wealthy family, at least upper middle class, and was filled with lots of techie toys, often apparently cobbled together out of odd parts by the kid himself. He stumbled out of bed groggily at the prodding of a radio-alarm and was aware that there were other family members already up and about downstairs. He wasn't looking forward to seeing them (especially, I think, his father). He was standing in front of an oval mirror, trying to remember what he'd been dreaming and inspecting his fairly rumpled appearance. (Physically, he was kind of similar to *Dream of the Endless*—thin, spiky black hair, high cheek-bones—only human in coloration.) There wasn't much light, and he reached across to a slide control which he had hooked up to increase the general illumination in the room, but only managed to increase the sound of the radio instead. This confused and annoyed him, and he leaned over closer to the wall to look at what was the matter in the dim light. As he did so, his eyes also fell on a bookshelf just below the controls. His books on the shelf were uniformly sized and neatly arranged—but at one end of the shelf there were several crumpled papers and some candles, including one large red candle, which didn't really fit at all but had been stuffed in at an angle anyway. These things had been given to the kid by his girlfriend, who was trying to expand his interests outside of the range of his techie hobbies, to include less rationalistic pursuits.

3/26/93 (Fri): In this dream I was living in an apartment similar to the one I really live in in outline, but larger, less cluttered, and with more and larger windows. Outside the windows were thin slats of a trellis-like structure, meant to support decorative vegetation, but bare and unused for many years. Inside, I lived alone, but Ginie was visiting. I had fallen asleep and when I woke up she had taken the big vine which hangs in the kitchen window and done things to it. The main body of it

had been taken out of its clay pot of dirt and put in a china vase full of water which was hanging from a crazy angle, lashed to a low chandelier-type light fixture hanging from the ceiling in the living room, where the long trailing strands of vine hung down to the floor. The cats had evidently had a merry time chewing, shredding and otherwise generally destroying the lengths of vine which had fallen within their reach. They had scattered when I woke up and saw what they were doing, but the light fixture still was swinging crazily as a result of their efforts. Also there were short lengths of vine which had evidently been cut from the main plant scattered everywhere. I was outraged that she had done this. I yelled and screamed at her things like "How dare you?" and "You had no right!" and "You don't even live here any more!!!" She seemed quite poised and unmoved by this, nor did she offer anything in the way of explanation or apology for what she'd done. However, while I was yelling at her she began putting each of the cuttings into tiny pots.

3/27/93 (Sat): Lots of active, confused dreaming, but no clear surviving memories of specifics.

3/28/93 (Sun): Again, lots of active confused dreaming, but this time with some memories: First, I am arriving at a fancy convention hotel with a woman I thought of as "Ginnie", but who obviously wasn't her, physically or any other way. We're going up in a glass-walled elevator opening onto a central terraced space (much like that at the Park Avenue Atrium on 45th Street). We get off on one floor with our luggage to switch elevators, and a young clean-shaven man with dark hair rushes out of a room—which has a door propped open, and in which a bunch of people are playing some kind of game—to greet the person I am with. They are evidently old friends; neither expected to see the other there. I have no idea who he is (and he pretty much acts as though I am not there). I don't remember ever getting to our room. Late that night, I am wandering on a street and find some abandoned cabinets, one of which holds a cache of medical equipment. Shortly, with no distinct transition, I am involved in some kind of Mission: Impossible-type bit with a bunch of other people who were trying to free someone (who may have been the woman I was in the hotel) from some kind of secret captivity in a hospital adjacent to the hotel. The "mission" goes awry when the medical equipment—which had been essential to my disguise—turns up missing and I'm left on my own cut off from the rest of the team, improvising, dressed as a doctor on some secure level of the facility near where this other person is being held.

There's a sink and a mirror at the end of a long white hallway. I'm leaning over the sink splashing water in my face wondering what to do next when I see someone in the mirror behind me, looking at me with too much curiosity. I quickly exit through the nearest door and find myself in an odd bathroom. In addition to several toilet stalls—some currently occupied—there is also a wall which is apparently a one-way mirror, revealing (from this side) a room where several people are evidently interrogating the person I've come to rescue. There are also two or three people standing at the mirror observing the interrogation; they take no notice of me. I have no idea how to proceed from here. I'm in way over my head, with no idea how to go either forward or back. Subsequently—after I've had a few minutes to panic internally—about a dozen characters dressed like costumed super-heroes wander into the interrogation room like some misdirected tour group, chattering among themselves and interrupting the proceedings, showing no concern for the protests of those already there. Some of them walk right through the mirror-wall like it isn't there and address me directly, sweeping me and the prisoner out with them.

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## Horrormeisters V

ANNE RICE

Exit to Eden (Dell) [1985]: By no stretch of the imagination is this a horror novel (unless you are *really* weirded out by the sexual practices described herein). But Rice is mainly known for her horror and the other two novels mentioned below qualify—so try to overlook it, okay?

What this is, in fact, is a romance novel set mostly in the ultimate S & M fantasy resort, which—as Rice vividly imagines it, anyway—is sort of a cross between Club Med, a sybarite masochist's wet dream, and est bootcamp with paddles. Anyway, the two protagonists are Lisa and Elliott—she is on staff at The Club (that's all it's ever called), has lived her whole adult life there, and has begun to feel like an alien everywhere else; he is a new recruit in this season's shipment of slaves. ("Slaves" are all volunteers who have been extensively tested and trained and who then sell themselves on 2-year contracts at international auction.) The Club is located on a private Caribbean island where everything is opulently first-rate and everybody is gorgeous. The Club plays host to the rich and powerful from around the world, and except for this little matter of their sexual preference,

everyone on staff there is so *nice* they practically squeak. Here, the transgression of sexual taboo is seen as an almost religious quest for personal fulfillment, and *The Club* goes to great lengths to make sure that no one is misused (paddles instead of whips, to make sure no blood is drawn, for example). It's a fantasy about acting out outlaw sexual fantasies in a "safe" environment, and Rice bends over backward to make a good case for *The Club* plot—but I'm pretty certain that if Rice wasn't as that. Interestingly, though, her couple—who are almost fanatically devoted to their chosen lifestyles as individuals—must leave the island once they meet, and go to New Orleans to actually fall in love and have sex as equals in an environment without the heavy power structures that *The Club* requires. The main conflict in the novel arises from the question of how—or if—the characters can have both *The Club* and their relationship too.

The writing is expert, when the characters aren't having sex they are having intelligent conversation, and I wasn't at all put off by them having sexual preferences other than my own. You know what bothered me? Everybody in this book is so damn rich it eventually got disgusting. (Be warned: Have sex and find enlightenment how and with whom you like, and if you can find a way to combine the two I'm definitely all for it—but if you never have to worry about how the bills are gonna be paid, you're gonna *piss me off!*)

**The Witching Hour** (Ballantine) [1990]: In a lot of ways this is a terrific book, and in a lot of ways it is damn annoying. Rice can write gorgeous prose, and she really draws you into her world with great skill. The first section of this book, set largely in the San Francisco Bay area, introduces the main characters and sets up the situation very promisingly. The woman, Rowan, is a neurosurgeon who was adopted and knows nothing about her family history. The man, Michael, made a tidy pile lovingly removing old homes. His life has been shattered by a near-death experience which left him grasping after half-remembered visions and with the unwanted power of involuntary psychometry. She's the one who pulled him from the San Francisco Bay after he'd been dead for an hour and resuscitated him; she has unusual abilities of her own. (This novel, also, seems to take place in the same world as Rice's *Vampire Chronicles*, as there is an omnipresent third semi-main character named Aaron Lightner, who is an agent of the Talamasca, the ancient order of psychic investigators which was introduced in those books.) They are all drawn, separately, at the end of this section, to New Orleans, where both Michael and Rowan were born, and into the multiple mysteries

surrounding Rowan's ancestors, the Mayfair Witches. Fine. This takes about 270 pages.

Then, for the next 400 pages—give or take—the present-day action moves at a crawl while we read over Michael's shoulder the 400-year history of Rowan's ancestors (as provided for him by Aaron). Now, much of this is quite interesting and has a direct bearing on the later development of the plot—but I'm pretty certain that if Rice wasn't such a Big Name, her editor would have gently but firmly suggested that this material should have been handled differently.

When I got to the end of this 1088-page novel and saw the ad for the sequel due in Fall, 1993, a lot of the other flaws toward the end of this one made sense to me. You see, there are these two terrific main characters who have psychic abilities and are highly intelligent and who in every way ought to have been quite capable of together figuring out what was going on and doing something about it—and who yet, nevertheless, walk right into a trap they should easily have seen far off. (As a reader, I saw it coming about 600 pages away, and assumed it was a red herring it was so obvious.) This trap is set by Lasher—the spirit that has haunted and seduced the Mayfairs since the mid-1600s. Both these folks are well aware of what he can do and has done, and they still act just like all those idiots in horror movies who should have known better than to go into that haunted house, writ large. And why? Because things have to turn out a certain way to set up the sequel, of course.

Don't get me wrong—in many ways, this is a wonderful book, and I will—grudgingly—eventually read the sequel. But these particular flaws really annoy me. A lot.

**The Tale of the Body Thief** (Knopf) [1992]: Geez, I hadn't realized this until now, but here I am with another Rice novel and here I am again full of complaints. This is the fourth of her *Vampire Chronicles*, and what I had hoped was that she would follow up some of those tantalizing hints of mysterious doings involving the numerous secondary characters left at the end of the third book. But no, this one is once again self-narrated by Lestat, who says right up front that any reader hoping for any of that stuff is right out of luck. He's fallen out of touch with all of those people since the end of the last book, and this book will be about him. Okay. I can live with that. Unfortunately, throughout this book, Lestat acts like a total ass. He was always flamboyant, floridly emotional, more given to grand egotistical gestures and upells of self-pity than to intelligent contemplation. But he

had shown some sign of actually having a brain before. It seems to me that this character has played himself out as a main lead, and Rice won't let him go. As above, Rice can't write *badly*—the book is still entertaining, and is full of lovely, often exotically disturbing prose. But I hope those other characters that got left in the wings get a chance to come out next time, because, for me, this Lestat wanker is losing his charm.

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### *Dreamscapes V*

**3/28/93 (Mon):** This morning I woke up in the middle of some Arabian Nights extravaganza. The plot and most of the detail escape me, but I remember a palace and a sneaky ex-vizier and snooping spies skulking about the palace listening around corners for the tribal rebels on the outskirts of town. One particular figure stands out, a kind of court body-guard, a short, stocky, fully-bearded man who seemed to be made—including his clothes—totally of shining gold, like a metallic golem, from his turban to his balloon pants and pointy shoes. Instead of a sword he carried two knobbed batons, which he used quite aggressively and with great skill when he felt his leige was threatened (or even just annoyed). His face seemed familiar, but the only person I can think of who he looked like was the guy who played the cyborg on the short-lived Space Rangers tv-show.

**4/3/93 (Fri):** I don't usually get raw and unvarnished deeply psycho-sexual dreams, but this one is embarrassingly so. The "I" viewpoint in this dream was pure passive id, an adult male who seemed to be all mindless erection and desire, lacking anything in the way of guilt or shame. (He spent the whole dream with his erection in his pants though.) Initially, he was reclining with his head in the lap of a woman he thought of as his mother. The setting is some kind of Greco-Roman exterior space with columns, near a fountain. He wrigglingly wants her to accomodate his sexual urges—which apparently was not unusual for them—but she refuses because she wants to conserve his sexual energies for some magical project she has in mind which she is not ready to explain to him. She is some kind of incredibly powerful sorceress or goddess or something to whom her son is pretty much some kind of pawn (although she did love him inasmuch as she

could love). (It was clear she had both casual and complete control both of him and of his sexual energies.) In fact, she is such a powerful magical being—and *this* is the really weird part—that her shit actually attempts to form itself spontaneously into fantastical homoculi. In particular, I remember looking into a bowl into which she had just deposited a couple large turds, and one in particular was in the process of becoming a kind of thalidomide mermaid (with a human woman's head and torso, but flippers instead of arms); it was beginning to actually breathe and move it's flukes with independent animation and may have actually tried to speak to me in a kind of wheezing voice, forced through an incompletely formed larynx, when the mother-figure made some kind of remark like "Oh, this can get so annoying!" and flushed it away before this phasmagoric fecal augury could tell me what it had to say.

**4/4/93 (Sat):** In considerable contrast to the above, this dream had an "I" who was crisply heroic and noble and self-assured. In defense of some truth or another, he had to become a fugitive for a while, forced to abandon his college career as he moved from place to place just ahead of his corporate/government/crypto-fascist pursuers, while using pay phones in various locales around the world to call in messages of truth and freedom to various news agencies and to bedevil his enemies. Eventually, he prevailed and returned to his university to resume his classes—accompanied by a good friend he had made in his travels—only to find that he was being made to feel that he didn't belong there any more by a jealous instructor who felt his now-notorious presence would be too disruptive. There was, specifically, a scene in a classroom where, although there were plenty of empty seats, the instructor had the other students crowd all the seats into one side of the room so that there wouldn't be any space for him to get into any of the chairs, then refused to begin lecturing until he left. The hero-guy had told his friend what a great place this was, so he found this doubly embarrassing and incomprehensible, but his friend only found it amusing and seemed to have expected it.

(After this I stopped clearly recalling my dreams again, though for a couple weeks I did get sporadic loose images from mostly-forgotten dreams, which faded within minutes of waking. Then, not even that. That's the way it goes.)

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*SAM*

